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ABSTRACT

Procedures for organizing political education assemblies which present high school students with both sides of political issues, credentials of candidates, and an understanding of the U.S. political system are described. The assemblies provide non-partisan or bi-partisan information for students to make logical, responsible decisions. Information for three types of assemblies--informational, motivational, and debate--is included. Informational assemblies deal with the mechanics of voting, political issues, and candidates and may be presented by use of filmstrips, slide shows, fact sheets, and oral presentations. A motivational assembly is designed to initiate action by students such as registering or voting. A debate assembly provides students with exposure to and evaluation of political candidates and issues. Criteria for planning an assembly, choosing the right type of assembly, selecting the audience, and scheduling the assembly are included. (KC)

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POLITICAL EDUCATION ASSEMBLY

Institute for Political/Legal Education

POLITICAL EDUCATION ASSEMBLY

The Institute for Political and Legal Education was developed through the cooperative efforts of the Institute staff, educators in local New Jersey districts, and the staff of the Office of Program Development, Division of Research, Planning, and Evaluation/Field Servies, the Department of Education, State of New Jersey. The political and legal materials were developed between 1971 and 1974 with funding from the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Title III.

In 1974, the political education program was validated as successful, cost-effective, and exportable by the standards and guidelines of the United States Office of Education. As a result, the program is now funded through ESEA, Title III as a demonstration site to provide dissemination materials and services to interested educators.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of a political education assembly in the high school is to provide students with the necessary non-partisan, or bi-partisan, information to make logical, responsible decisions as concerned citizens and mature voters.

The assembly is a vehicle for presenting students with both sides of a political issue, the credentials and appearance of all candidates for the same political office, and a clear understanding of the mechanics and regulations of the American political system.

It is not a method by which students are to be manipulated for support or defeat of any political issue or candidate. It must, at all times, remain non-partisan, or bi-partisan, providing a variety of different views and further enhancing the educational process.

TYPES OF POLITICAL ASSEMBLIES

There are basically three (3) different types of political education assemblies: (1) the informational assembly, (2) the motivational assembly, and (3) the debate assembly. These may further be categorized in terms of: (a) who has been invited to attend, (b) scheduled time of presentation, and (c) determination as non-partisan or bi-partisan.

Informational Assembly

The purpose of this assembly is simply to provide information on all aspects of various issues. It usually deals with three general categories:

1. The mechanics and regulations of voting
   Operation of voting booths, presentation of registration and voting statutes, and examination of the local party system are possible topics.

2. Political issues
   The development of an issue, its effect upon the community, and the candidates' views can be presented (e.g., ecological projects, equal rights, governmental economic problems.)

3. Candidates
   Objective, factual information (not a debate) regarding candidates' credentials, past voting records, and previous achievements is presented by the candidates, party representatives, or an impartial researcher.

Methods of presentation for an informational assembly might include filmstrips, recordings, oral presentations, distributed fact sheets, and, in cases such as operation of voting machines, actual physical demonstrations by individuals such as the superintendent of elections. A successful informational assembly will probably include a combination of these methods.

Motivational Assembly

This type of assembly is designed to initiate action by students, such as registering, voting, or a debating activity allowing audience inquiries and participation. Its function is not to influence students regarding a specific candidate or issue, but to motivate them to evaluate both sides of an issue and

then take a position as responsible citizens. It is extremely important that an equal number of representatives is provided for each candidate or opinion and that the moderator remain neutral.

Regardless of the classification, the coordinator of the activity must evaluate the function and type of the presentation and the audience composition.

Debate Assembly

The debate assembly provides the opportunity for student exposure to and evaluation of political candidates and/or issues.

It is important that an equal number of representatives are provided for each candidate or opinion, and that the moderator remains neutral at all times. Either candidates or their representatives may be included in the debate. The further removed you become from a local election, the more difficult it will be to schedule candidate appearances.

If time is allowed for audience participation during a debate, be sure not to allow the same individual to pose a question twice until all other audience participants have been given a chance.

Planning an Assembly

There are several major criteria which should be considered when making plans for an assembly. The coordinating staff should determine:

1. the intended function of the assembly (i.e., to inform or to motivate?)
2. the type of assembly which will best implement the proposed purpose
3. the audience required to achieve the desired goal
4. the amount of planning time required for successful coverage
5. the individuals who must receive prior notification in order to arrange school activity schedules to complement the assembly.

Function of Assembly

In determining the purpose, consideration must be given to the motivational or informational aspects of the program. Is the assembly being held for motivating students to register and vote? Or is it being held for the single reason of supplying political information?

It is only after the function of the assembly has been decided that a logical choice can be made regarding speakers and the type of assembly which will accomplish the goal.

Choosing Right Type of Assembly

The manner in which your information is communicated can make the difference of whether or not it is understood by those attending the program.

A political information assembly used for the purpose of urging students to register and vote might be a terrible failure if half the audience has dozed off into boredom after listening to ten minutes of historical political facts. However, with the use of filmstrips, demonstrations of voting machine operation (with student-audience participation), and perhaps a debate and/or several other motivational techniques, you might be successful in urging students to participate in the electoral process.

Feel free to incorporate the three types of assemblies (informational, motivational, and debate). This will increase the chance of maintaining audience interest and decrease the possibility of boredom. Remember, the purpose of the assembly is to communicate something to the audience. The political education assembly is being held for attending students, administrators, and faculty -- not for you. Be creative and imaginative and you increase the chance of success.

Selecting Audience

Preferably, the entire student body, faculty, and staff should be invited to any political education assembly that is conducted. However, problems of space and scheduling may not allow for the attendance you desire. In this case, you must establish priority criteria.

The criteria should be used to determine what students are invited and should be related directly to the intended function of the assembly. Some criteria which should be used are as follows:

1. Who will best utilize the information received by transforming it into measurable action (i.e., voting) at the earliest time?

2. Who must receive the information presented to keep it consistent with the purpose of holding the assembly?

3. Who will be able to most practicably apply the information presented on a long-term, meaningful basis?

For example, if you were conducting an assembly on voter participation and had only room for 500 students out of a student body of 1,500, you would logically select, as a first priority, registered voters and potential eligible voters. Then you would invite seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. Note: In this case, there might be an 18-year-old junior who should be invited as well as a 17-year-old senior.

Scheduling Assembly

You want to give yourself and the people working with you enough time to arrange their schedules in accordance with your assembly. Filmstrips, projectors, and any additional equipment usually must be applied for in advance.

The coordinator should contact the various political party experts and candidates concerning speaking engagements. Potential community and political speakers have their own daily schedules, which are usually set well in advance. You should allow for a very minimum of three (3) months advance invitation. To secure a voting machine requires a vote of approval by the County Board of Elections. They meet once monthly and also have a previous schedule of appointments. Again, in such cases allow a minimum of three to four (3-4) months notification.

If possible, schedule with secured dates and sites all assemblies one year in advance. This is not very difficult. When a major election occurs next fall, you can plan with relative ease the type of assembly you wish to conduct and when you wish to have it. In addition, many school districts require that all assembly dates be confirmed by mid-September.

As soon as scheduling is finalized, notify in writing all school administrators, faculty, and staff. Make sure that they receive the dates, time, and general content of your assembly, and that they receive it far enough in advance to avoid scheduling conflicts. This is important in order to avoid conflicts with school exams or other events.

Extra-Curricular Assemblies

Extra-curricular assemblies, so titled because they occur after normal school hours or outside school property, require additional planning to avoid conflicts with family schedules so as to ensure maximum audience. This may also include the community as invited audience members.

It may be necessary to conduct political assemblies somewhere other than school property due to school policy restricting such assemblies because of scheduling conflicts during or after school hours. When locating a new site, choose one that has the capacity to hold a substantial number of people (at least 300) and is easily accessible and attractive.

When choosing hours, keep in mind as the major priority that the time you choose must be one which will allow a majority of people to attend. Thus, five o'clock would not be a good time because most people would be eating dinner. It would make more sense to hold it at eight o'clock on a night which does not have any other major event or club meetings scheduled. In some cases, it might make more sense to hold it directly after school.

Be sure to check that the time you select does not conflict with athletic events, booster drives, etc. It is advisable to first select several times (and dates) and then to arrive at the best time through careful evaluation.

If members of the community are invited as part of the audience, be sure to invite individuals from established organizations and political parties through their leaders. It might even be advisable to obtain official support and/or co-sponsorship from these organizations.

Note: When conducting an extra-curricular assembly, and especially one in which the community is invited, be sure to check police requirements. It may be required to hire a police patrolman and notify the local rescue squad or health office of the project.

Checklist for Success

If the assembly is to have real significance, it should be supplemented with planned activities (preferably measureable) and a follow-through activity which should relate directly to the content of the assembly. For example, an assembly on

voter registration should be followed by a voter registration rally and drive. An exact report, including the number of students registered and voted should later be compiled to measure the effectiveness of the project.

The process of planning a successful assembly and follow-through becomes a reality when implemented in an orderly, logical procedure. Therefore the following procedural checklist for a political education assembly should be adhered to during the planning and dissemination phases of the assembly:

_____ Select general topic by committee (six months-one year in advance)
_____ Determine type of presentation
_____ Present proposed program to proper administrative personnel
_____ Select and confirm site and date (six months-one year in advance)
_____ Select, invite, and confirm distinguished speakers (four months-one year in advance)
_____ Arrange for security (police)
_____ Notify school administration, faculty, and student organizations (six months-one year in advance)
_____ Arrange agenda structure (six months-one year in advance)
_____ Secure audio-visual and additional equipment
_____ Initiation of publicity (press releases and posters: one month in advance for mandatory attendance of students; six months in advance for voluntary attendance and extra-curricular assemblies)
_____ Finalize audience attendance, speaker presentations, etc.
_____ Present assembly
_____ Send "thank you" correspondence
_____ Develop, prepare, and distribute evaluation report